

Compliance with Information Reporting: Exempt Organizations¹

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Do Exempt Organizations Comply with Required Information Reporting?

This question bedevils persons seeking to understand what exempt organizations do for our society. It haunts those who wish to regulate exempt organizations. This investigation presents a methodology for increasing our understanding of good-faith information reporting, and it challenges the IRS to use authority available to increase compliance with information reporting.

Scope and importance

Nonprofits provide a major part of education, health, and social welfare services. They support cultural activities, advocacy, and many professions and industries. The public knows little about the birth of nonprofits and their subsequent operation. Activity may be reported on information returns that are filed with the IRS. Information filing is waived for many small organizations and religious congregations. The need for public information about exempt organizations appears obvious. Donors would like assurance that their contributions are applied to the stated purpose of the organization. Taxpayers would like Government assurance that activities of the organization have value larger than the tax that would otherwise be collected. Private businesses that compete with exempt organizations need assurance that governing boards do not enrich themselves at public expense. And citizens would like to know that tax exemption generates good value for the community and the nation.

This investigation focuses on administrative records that confer exemption and subsequent annual information reports. The perspective is demographic (Twombly, 2003; Nucci, 1997; and Jarmin, Klimek, and Miranda, 2005). Organizations are created; they survive for a period of time; and some fail. The IRS Exempt Organizations Business Masterfile contains a registry of

rulings that confer exemption. We use a public extract of this registry to find newly-formed organizations. Some organizations file information returns, which may occur before or after inclusion in the public extract. The demise of exempt organizations is noted on some information returns. Lapse into inactivity and dissolution is not precisely dated by the public extract.

Births in the Master Registry

The Urban Institute Master datafile compiles a cumulative history of active organizations included the public extract at some time. Master contains information from applications for tax-exempt status (IRS Forms 1023 and 1024,). Religious congregations are not required to apply for exemption; they automatically are designated as 501(c)(3) organizations. Master contains over 1.7 million records, excluding most religious congregations. The date of the ruling that confers exempt status has been systematically included in the public extract since 1995.² The earliest rule dates in Master precede the Second World War. The last extract included in Master for this analysis was released in April 2004.

Urban Institute's Master contains all exempt organizations that were ever designated as active by the IRS. Some become operational; some do not. Filing annual information returns is mandated for exempt organizations with an average of more than \$25,000 of gross receipts in the most recent 3 years (except religious and government organizations).

New organizations are defined here to exclude:

- (a) organizations exempt under 501(c)(1),(2),(4) and higher,
- (b) organizations present in the Master for 1989,
- (c) organizations that file Form 990/990EZ more than 2 years before the date of their rulings (those organizations modified a prior, exempted activity), and
- (d) organizations receiving exempt rulings after 2002.

These conditions limit "new" organizations to a population of 309,857 recognized as tax-exempt under 501(c)(3) from 1995 to 2002. (Additional information that is pertinent to (b) and (c) appears in the Appendix.)

Filing of 990 Information Returns

New Master organizations were matched to Form 990/990EZ information returns. All fiscal years ending in the interval 1990 to 2002 were eligible for

matching.³ Matched organizations filed at least one Form 990 between 1993 and 2002. The match reveals the first tax year in which the organization filed Form 990/990EZ. Matches answer the question: What proportion of new organizations file within a specified period after the approval? Organizations approved near the beginning of our sample period (1995-2002) are at risk to file returns in more years than organizations approved in later years. Consequently, we control for elapsed time since the exempt-status ruling in the analysis.

Unmatched organizations include two populations: organizations that are not required to file and organizations that fail to comply. Legal noncompliance cannot be determined from public data. We use the term noncompliance to include all organizations that delay filing for more than 12 months after the deadline. (That group includes compliant organizations with filing extensions). Noncompliance also occurs when organizations evade their filing obligations altogether. Late filing leads to a negative bias in filing rates for organizations whose first year of filing is near the end of the period, e.g. 2002. We distinguish nonmatched organizations that cannot be located or are inactive from active organizations that may file after 2002.

Findings

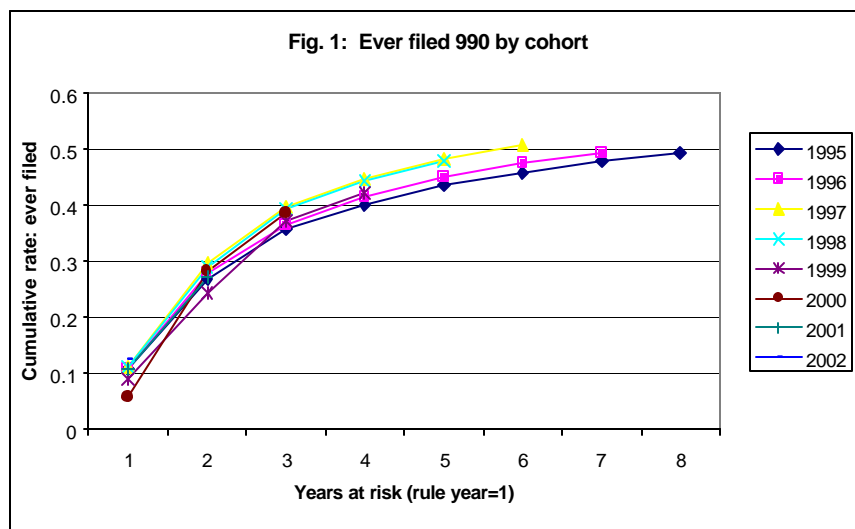
The methodology assures that exempt organizations display a pattern of filing that increases steadily as the number of years since the date of ruling increases. Twelve percent of the 2002 cohort began filing information returns by 2002, and they were at risk to file for 1 year. Half of the 1995 cohort began filing information returns by 2002, and that cohort was at risk to file for 8 years. See Table 1.

Table 1.--New Organizations Matched to Forms 990, 990-EZ, or 990-PF, 1993-2002

Cohort	Matching filers by cohort (000's)		
	New exempt organizations	Filed at least once	Rate
1995	29.7	14.6	0.493
1996	30.5	15.1	0.495
1997	34.5	17.5	0.507
1998	36.9	17.7	0.481
1999	41.5	17.5	0.422
2000	43.0	16.7	0.388
2001	45.9	12.5	0.273
2002	47.9	6.0	0.125
Total	309.9	117.7	0.380

Time patterns of first-filing year are similar across cohorts. See Figure 1. Depending on the cohort, between 24 percent and 30 percent of organizations have filed Forms 990/990EZ by the year following their exemption (labeled 2 in the figure). Three years following exemption, 40 percent to 45 percent have filed at least one Form 990/990EZ. (Filing in anticipation of a favorable ruling is rare. It accounts for 0.02 percent to 1.3 percent of all organizations within the eight cohorts.) Differences in the history of the 1995 to 1998 cohorts are suggestive but not statistically tested. The 1997 and 1998 cohorts appear to be on identical trajectories and lie above the 1996 trajectory after year 3. The 1997 and 1998 cohorts appear to be on identical trajectories and lie above the 1996 trajectory after year 3. The 1996 trajectory lies slightly above the 1995 trajectory. These differences may be a trend in increased reporting; however, that can only be certain when more years are added to these few observations. Any inflation in receipts causes the fixed money threshold for filing 990 returns to capture an increasing share of the burgeoning exempt organization population.

Figure 1. Ever filed 990 by cohort and years at risk



Prevalence of filing 990 returns varies substantially within each cohort. The National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) is used to classify 12 major sectors. Table 2 shows filing rates for those sectors, separately for the 1995 and 1996 cohorts. Max (column 3) is the largest filing rate achieved by each major sector. Mutual membership, public benefit, and health organizations rank in the top 4 of the 12 sectors in both years. Religious organizations have the lowest rank, as most congregations are not required to file.⁴

Table 2.--Rate of Ever Filing Information Returns Before 2003 by National Taxonomy of Exempt Organizations (NTEE) for Organizations Exempted in 1995 or 1996

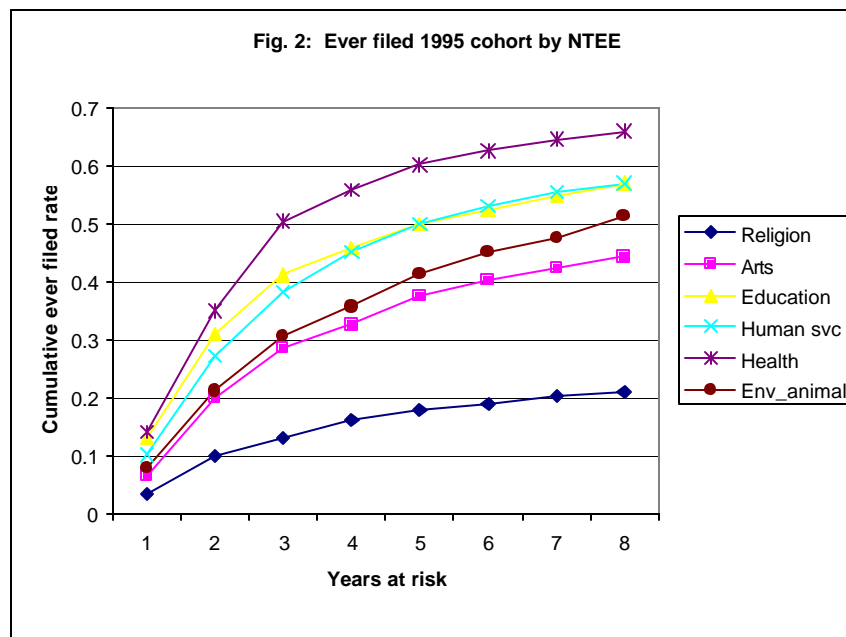
Ever filed by 2002 for NTEE and cohort				
Rank	NTEE major group	Max.	Average	New orgs.
1995 cohort				
1	Mutual membership	0.786	0.661	14
2	Public Benefit	0.762	0.509	4682
3	Science and Technology	0.667	0.503	111
4	Health	0.661	0.411	1928
5	Social Science	0.620	0.423	79
6	Human Services	0.571	0.338	7514
7	Education	0.571	0.347	4005
8	International Affairs	0.537	0.371	298
9	Environment and Animals	0.515	0.282	1127
10	Arts and Culture	0.444	0.253	3001
11	Religion	0.211	0.121	3973
12	Unclassified	0.058	0.038	2952
1996 cohort				
1	Mutual membership	0.923	0.667	13
2	Public Benefit	0.723	0.458	4980
3	Health	0.638	0.388	1972
4	Education	0.561	0.334	4083
5	Human Services	0.560	0.315	8234
6	Social Science	0.554	0.431	65
7	International Affairs	0.537	0.339	257
8	Science and Technology	0.526	0.326	97
9	Environment and Animals	0.498	0.266	1132
10	Arts and Culture	0.433	0.238	3174
11	Religion	0.205	0.113	4532
12	Unclassified	0.118	0.072	1944

Average (column 4) is a simple average of the cumulative probabilities of filing over the years available for each cohort. Obviously, Average imparts less information than Max. It follows that new organizations contribute proportionately less information on Form 990/990EZ returns than organizations established before 1995. The number of new organizations (column 5) varies

widely across NTEE sectors and by cohorts. The precision of estimates depends on the number of new organizations, and the time patterns are less reliable for sectors that spawn only a few new organizations from 1995 to 2002.

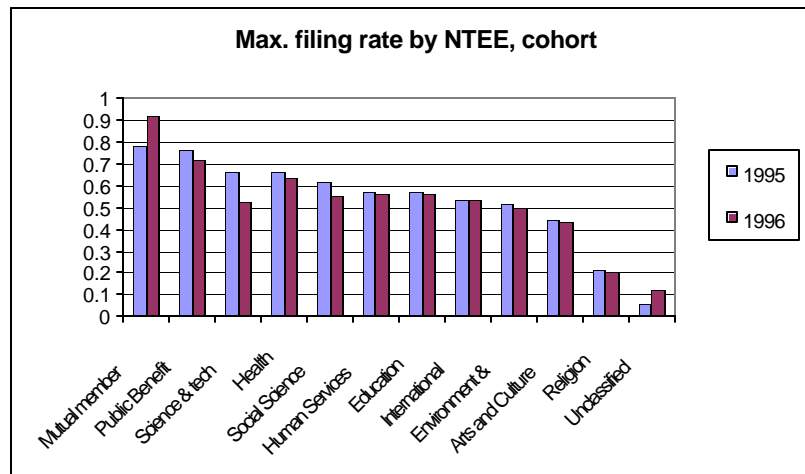
Figure 2 shows the time pattern of filing for selected major sectors of the 1995 cohort. Health and religious organizations show the development of the differences commented on in Table 2.

Figure 2.--Ever filed Pattern: 1995 cohort, selected NTEE classes



The waiver of information filing for churches can be related to these statistics. About two-thirds of religious organizations on the Master declare that they are legally exempted from filing; only 3 percent of that group subsequently files Form 990. The 63 percent that remain are compliant organizations. When they are added to the proportion that ever filed in Figure 2, three-fourths of the sector is accounted for by 2002.

Figure 3 offers a visual picture of Max in table 2. It confirms similarity of filing by the 1995 and 1996 cohorts.

Figure 3.--Ever filed for years before 2003 by NTEE, for the 1995 and 1996 Cohorts

Conclusions and interpretation

Entrants into the nonprofit sector are incompletely represented by statistics from Form 990. A positive view of these findings is that after a “shakedown” period of 3 years, at least 40 percent of 501(c)(3) organizations have filed an information return. Most large organizations file, and financial information on their returns covers a disproportionate share of the total value in the sector. Organizations that are tiny in financial scope and activity can be ignored.

The negative view is that 55 percent-to-60 percent of new nonprofits are invisible 3 years after their exemption has been granted. We cannot infer that all are small. Some are large religious organizations exempt from reporting. Low-reporting rates may result from compliance, filing thresholds, or filing extensions. They may result from noncompliance. Evidence available from Form 990 filing suggests that filing practice does not serve the public with timely information. Whether as a result of extensions or noncompliance, 70 percent of all organizations fail to file within the 5-month interval permitted after the end of the accounting year.⁵ The absence of aggressive pressure on large organizations to file in a timely way creates doubt that all organizations feel it is important to inform the public. Some organizations may feel no obligation to file information returns.

Figure 1 reveals dynamic behavior of newly exempt organizations. The proportion of organizations that have ever filed returns differs from the cross-sectional proportion of exempt organizations that file in any given year. Four factors transform the estimates considered here to cross-sectional estimates. First, any year contains a mix of filing organizations that first filed at each elapsed time shown in Figure 1. Second, some will not file, although they filed in an earlier year. Third, more recent cohorts are larger than the earlier cohorts; so, a weighted average of the dynamic rates is less than the average calculated in Table 2. (The appendix gives more information on growth in 501(c) organizations.) Fourth, the behavior of cohorts that are more than 8 years beyond their initial exemption rulings must be averaged with the new cohorts shown here to arrive at a cross-sectional filing rate.

The Right Question?

The estimates presented answer the question: What proportion of “new” organizations ever file a Form 990? They use the number of organizations exempted in a particular year as the denominator in calculating the rate of filing. A different question is: What proportion of “active” organizations in a cohort ever file a Form 990? With the passage of time, some exempted organizations cease to be active.⁶ Examining successive versions of the public extract reveals organizations that disappear from the extract. A few organizations indicate that their Form 990 is the final return. The organization is then dropped from the extract. Organizations that cannot be located or are deemed inactive also are removed from the extract. That occurs after organizations fail to respond to followup letters and telephone calls. Contact information is updated every 3 years. That interval implies uncertainty about the year in which nonfiling organizations cease operations. It could be the first year after a positive response to the followup cycle, or as much as 3 years after a positive response to the followup cycle.

Ambiguity in year of failure confounds estimates of the number of active organizations in the 1995-2002 cohorts. By April 2004, some 8,515 of the 309,857 organizations studied here had been reclassified as inactive or unable to locate. Some 1,041 organizations ceased operations, became inactive, or could not be found during the 1995-2002 period.⁷ How many of the remaining 7,474 should be considered failed at the end of 2002? Since organizations that cannot be found are not designated inactive until 3 years after last contact, it is likely that many of these organizations actually failed during the 1995-2002 time window. If we assume all 8,515 organizations failed within the period, we can calculate an upper bound for the proportion of active organizations that have ever filed by 2002. Ever filed rates for active organi-

zations are about 3 percent larger than rates based on all organizations. The adjustment factor varies by birth cohort, as exposure to the risk of failure is the greatest for the 1995 cohort and the least for the 2002 cohort. The adjustment factor also varies by year, as failures are more prevalent in recessions. Variation by cohort is shown in Table 3.

Table 3.—Multipliers To Convert “Ever Filed” Rates for 2002 to Rates for Organizations Active in 2002

Multipliers to convert “ever filed” rates for 2002 to rates for organizations active in 2002								
Cohort	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Multiplier	1.041	1.043	1.029	1.027	1.048	1.029	1.018	1.005

The Future

Information about 501(c)(3) organizations can be made more comprehensive. Four imperatives are being discussed by the Senate Finance Committee (Staff White Paper, June 22, 2004), the IRS, and leaders of the nonprofit sector:

- (a) Improve followup of nonfilers.
- (b) Create incentives for organizations to inform the public.
- (c) Require electronic filing of Form 990/990EZ.
- (d) Revise forms and letters used by the IRS to make them “user friendly.”

Some nonprofit sector researchers argue that the current triennial followup of nonfilers is ineffective. Tracing organizations 36 months after a ruling often fails because organizations relocate headquarters, change officers named in the Form 1023/1024 application, and change telephone contacts. Boris and Lampkin (2004, p. 6) propose an annual cycle. Long experience with following individuals and organizations in panel surveys confirms that annual or semiannual followup is necessary to keep contact information current (Biemer and Lyberg 2003). Boris and Lampkin recommend that organizations failing to e-file essential contact information, as that information changes, be dropped from the extract. Whatever mode is used to follow up exempted organizations, Form 1023/1024 and followup letters need to elicit more routes for future contact. Each organization should designate multiple contact persons, their homes and a second (work, associate) address for each, and e-mail address(es), beyond the single contact person, mailing address, and Web address now requested.

The authors of the White Paper recommend termination of exempt status as a penalty for failure to file requested information for 2 years. They contend that this is appropriate as an obligation to disclose comes with the privilege exemption from taxation. Forestalling loss of exemption is feasible for any organization with competent accountants.

The White Paper also endorses e-filing for the sector. The Urban Institute has empowered e-filing. NCCS, in concert with stakeholders, developed an electronic filing capability, which could be used to file Form 990-EZ [2003]. Electronic became available to file Form 990 [2004] this year. Secondly, NCCS has convened regulators and accountants for exempt organizations to devise a reporting protocol that meets the needs of both Federal and State agencies. The availability of an agreed-upon protocol for filing obviates the need for separate filings to the Federal and State governments and assures that e-filing suffices for both Federal and State purposes. Electronic filing of returns and followup information will reduce the burden of reporting and improve the quality of the information offered. Completeness of the response, and increased consistency of items of information provided can be assured by software (Couper and Nicholls, 1998).

Lastly, “usability testing” and “cognitive analysis” greatly reduce confusion and ambiguity that is embedded in the current forms. One example is the “Number of employees” question, which appears in Part VI rather than Part II where expenses associated with employees are reported. Top-performing Web designers and survey data collectors now require this kind of testing for Web-based data collection and paper forms. (See Blessing et al., 2003 for application and references.)

The analysis presented demonstrates the value of tracking exempt organizations from their formation to their dissolution. It reveals that more frequent followup of nonfiling organizations could enhance our understanding of the degree to which information returns are filed by active organizations. Lastly, it raises an important public policy question. Is more timely filing important to public oversight of exempted organizations? We have no answer to this question, but it is clear that, at most, 1 more year of information could be added to the analysis presented, implying that understanding what happens in the exempt sector lags activity of the sector by more than 2 years.

Widespread use of electronic filing will enhance the value of information reporting by exempt organizations. It will improve accuracy of reported information. It will create a body of information that is more accessible to the public. It should reduce the compliance cost of information filing, as the electronic filing encompasses both Federal and State requirements.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

- ¹ Address correspondence and questions to mdavid@ui.urban.org
- ² Urban Institute public extracts do not contain rule dates before 1995. However, date of exempt ruling has been included in the IRS Exempt Organizations Business Masterfile since 1960.
- ³ IRS Return Transaction Files show tax year and end date for the organization accounting year. Returns for 1990-1992 provide evidence to exclude preexisting organizations from our analysis. (See the appendix.) 2002 was the most recent year available at the time of this analysis.
- ⁴ Unclassified organizations have a lower prevalence, but that is a deficiency in the data. Any organization that files information returns supplements information used to classify the organization at the time of application for exempt status.
- ⁵ Tabulations by the National Center for Charitable Statistics (See Boris and Lampkin, 2004). The statistic does not distinguish extensions and noncompliance. The public need for timely information is compromised by filings that take more than 12 months after the stipulated deadline.
- ⁶ A random sample of 300 nonfiling organizations revealed that 14 percent had failed and another 7 percent could not be located. See IRS (December 1994).
- ⁷ One-sixth (161) of these organizations ever filed Form 990. The remaining five-sixths (880) were dropped from the public extract by inability of IRS to follow the organization.

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Appendix

All “births” compared to 501(c)(3) births

Cohorts of organizations that obtained rulings after 1994 and before March 2004 include about 422,000 organizations. However, both newly created organizations and ongoing organizations whose exempt status was modified (for example, to reflect a change in applicable Code section) are included in this count. The distinction will be clarified below.

Table A1. “New” organizations by year of exempt ruling

"New" Organizations by cohort (000's)			
Cohort	501c3	All 501c	Ratio
1995	32.1	37.5	0.856
1996	32.6	37.8	0.861
1997	35.5	41.4	0.857
1998	37.7	43.3	0.872
1999	42.1	47.8	0.880
2000	43.5	48.9	0.889
2001	46.3	51.7	0.895
2002	48.5	53.9	0.899
2003	44.0	48.9	0.900
2004	9.9	10.8	0.914
Total	372.0	422.0	0.882

Table A1 displays the count of approvals by calendar year. Two features stand out. The number of approvals grew steadily from 1995 until 2002. Second, 501(c)(3) public charities and foundations constituted 86 percent of approvals in 1995. That proportion increased to 90 percent in 2003, implying that 501(c)(3) organizations are increasingly dominant among all exempt organizations.

A scatter plot of monthly approvals appears in Figure A1. The number of approvals varies substantially within each year and shows little seasonal variation. The trend of approvals is deceptive. Approvals increased by 190

approvals per month over the months from January 1995 to October 2002. That linear trend accounts for 43 percent of the total variance in approvals. However, the trend arises entirely from exemptions granted to 501(c)(3) organizations. Neither (c)(4) nor other exempt organizations show a significant trend in exemptions. The trend in (c)(3) approvals accounts for 94 percent of the variance in (c)(3) approvals over the period. See Figure A2.

Figure A1: Monthly approvals of exempt status for all 501(c) organizations, 1/1995-10/2002

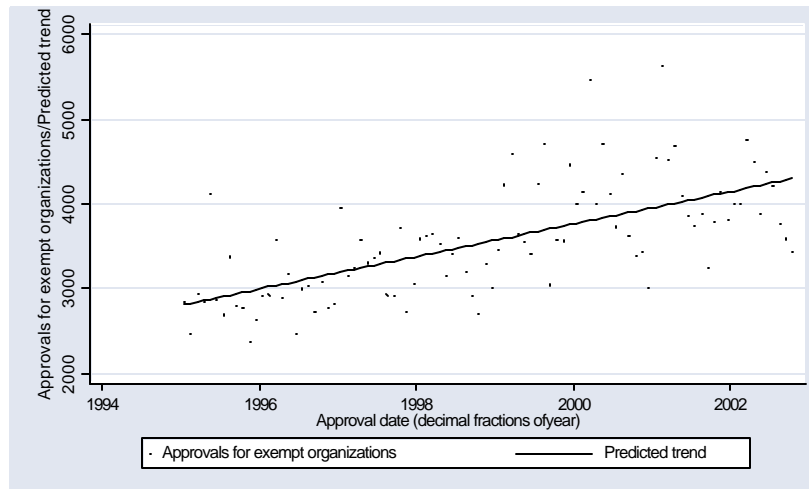
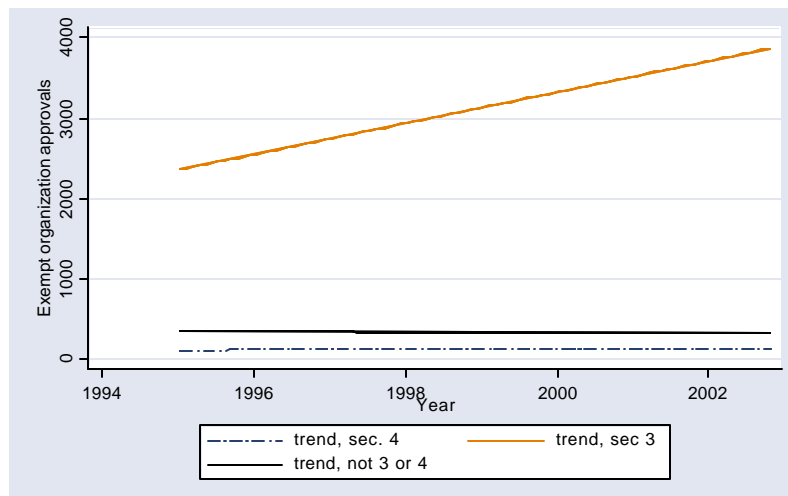


Figure A2: Trend of monthly approvals, 1/1995-10/2002



All rulings in the period 1995-2003, compared to “new” rulings

The gross figures above overstate the number of “new” organizations. A determination that an organization is exempt may be required for an ongoing organization. About 9,300 organizations with rulings in the period of interest, 1995-2003, appear in the Master registry for 1989. Clearly, these organizations operated prior to the “birth” of other organizations from 1995-2003. That indication of preexisting organizations is the visible part of a larger problem. When organizations make substantive changes in their legal identities, a new employer identifying number (EIN) is assigned. Continuing organizations that receive new EIN’s cannot be detected in the Master registry. “Apparently new” cannot be distinguished from “actually new” organizations.

Information return filing prior to the ruling date

Inclusion of years prior to the year of the ruling (condition c, on page 2) conforms to IRS procedure. All organizations must obtain an employer identification number prior to, or at the time of, application for exempt status. The date at which IRS receives the EIN is recorded as `established_prd`. At the organization’s request, the Exempt Organizations Division may then confer an “advanced ruling” that allows the organization to begin operations and accumulate a record necessary to obtain a formal ruling that the organization is exempt. Occasionally, organizations file information returns prior to the ruling date to document their activity and confirm that operations lie within the scope of exemption under the subsection of 501(c) that is requested.

The public extract does not disclose `established_prd`. So analysis excluded organizations filing prior to 2 years in advance of the ruling date. Organizations may file Form 990 information return before they receive exempt status. They may defer the request for exempt status for as much as 27 months after they begin operations. Some 839 organizations are excluded by the 2-year cutoff; most of them filed returns for many years prior to the cutoff. Conversely, those organizations are one-sixth of those filing before the year of the ruling.

Investigation of `established_prd` confirms that 2 years in advance of the ruling date includes 85 percent of the “new” organizations exempted in the years 1995-2003. About 14,000 of 349,000 organizations (inclusive of 501(c)(4)+ and not appearing in the 1989 registry) began filing 3 years prior to the ruling date; 40,000 filed 4 or more years prior.